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Group Soul Who Owns the Artist Fusion?

Charles Green

The intersection of Western Desert painting and a 1980s post-studio artist collaboration makes us think, and assert overtly the importance of Western Desert painting to a global audience, even though critics and curators find it difficult to place it in the context of contemporary art. They acknowledge its importance, but are constricted by categorisations based on the assumption that nationality or ethnicity equals narrative. The last twenty years or so demonstrate, though, the failure, not the necessity, of the idea of nationalisms and, equally, the dark dangers lurking behind the valorisation of ethnicity and religion. By this I mean that the regional narrative does not really explain very much, except to Sotheby's or Christies' clients; although models that show the virtual Balkanisation, overlapping dispersal and globalisation of different types of art and audiences certainly seem to – as anthropological frameworks are being displaced at the same time in the study of Aboriginal art. The reasons for this history lesson I hope will become clear: the stakes are high with regard to artists and visibility.

The genesis of this paper lies in a couple of paragraphs in my book, *The Third Hand: Artist Collaborations from Conceptualism to Postmodernism* (2001), about a strange 1983 action by the collaborative team, Serbian artist Marina Abramovic and German artist Ulay, the significance of which only became apparent to me much later. I see a shift from the 1960s–1970s artistic collaborations towards something quite different – a shift from fashioning the self through collaboration (Gilbert & George, Mel Ramsden and Ian Burn, Christo and Jeanne-Claude) to, now, depicting the collaborating self in order to enact particular ethical problems or positioning the self in relation to new or old friends and communities, and in relation to tasks and projects. Within this, though, we are asserting a less familiar cross-cultural genealogy. I will argue that the overarching field of world memory that artist collaborations inevitably foreground¹ – in which post-studio artist collaborations are a special, symptomatic case – is governed by a set of rules and distinctions. These rules transcend and override the now-hackneyed discourse of postmodern

1. For an explanation of the concept of world memory, see Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-image* (1985), trans Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1989, p 119. See also Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs: The Complete Text* (1964), trans Richard Howard, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2000.

appropriation and its associated postcolonial protocols of speaking positions.

My aim is to delineate the artistic field generated by the incorporation of others and 'Others' within cross-cultural or cross-artist fusions. In Australia, this is a particularly loaded topic. My review of art's autonomy takes a different direction from that of most writers. The emphasis of my essay will be on ownership rather than production. I am also insisting on the difference between two models of artistic collaboration. The first is the popularly held view of collaboration as reconciliation, implying both profit and loss. This book-keeping sense of the word sees artistic collaboration as a balance. A deficit in one part of the relationship is compensated by a surplus somewhere else – a partnership or a cooperative to which individuals bring something that can also be taken away.

In the second model of artistic collaboration, the parts of the relationship merge to form something else, in which the whole is more than the sum of the parts. The parts are not removable or replaceable because they do not combine, as much as change. The collaboration itself exists as a distinct and distinctive entity. Collaboration, in specific cases like the one I describe – and perhaps in more recent task-based collectives such as Atelier van Lieshout in the Netherlands – is an act of disappearance, born not out of a desire to break through the limitations of the self but from a desire to neutralise the self in order to clear working space.

There is a cultural problem at the core of my insistence that difference is not necessarily of foremost importance and I need to spell this out. I am not arguing for naïve aestheticism, nor equally do I think that artistic collaboration is a good thing in itself. I am going to draw upon my artist collaborator Lyndell Brown's recent work on Aby Warburg, the early twentieth-century art historian who invented the discipline of iconology and who renovated the study of the survival of the Antique in later periods of art. Warburg, of course, has been reassessed in opposing ways both by Benjamin Buchloh and by Brown as prefiguring the archival turn in recent art – Buchloh insisting on Warburg's modernity and Brown on the reverse, as she says:

We might mistakenly think that Warburg was conflating intentionality (the intention to represent pathos through allegorical description) with the creation of empathic affect (the affect of pathos), but he wasn't. Instead, in his 1927 *Mnemosyne Atlas*, Warburg saw the artist as the hostage of cultural memory and as a supplementary presence in the work of art. The collision of culturally constructed imperatives with technological and social change, accompanied by the much less important variables of personality, forces us to see, he pessimistically and critically thought back in the 1920s, the history of artistic styles as the result of the pressure of cultural memory, rather than of innovations through self-expression or invention.²

I now turn to the visits to Australia in 1979 and 1981 by Marina Abramovic and Ulay. I am suggesting that the importance and authority of Western Desert Aboriginal painting during the same period, when it was still a largely undiscovered and barely comprehended phenomenon, is crucial to comprehending Abramovic/Ulay's gruelling, ritualistic performance art. It is therefore important to point out *where* and *how*

2. See Lyndell Brown and Charles Green, 'Robert Smithson's Ghost in 1920s Hamburg: Reading Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* as a Non-Site', *Visual Resources: An International Journal of Documentation*, 18:2, June 2002, pp 167–81. This paper draws on Lyndell Brown's unpublished PhD thesis, *Mnemosyne: Memory and Forgetting in Art*, College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, Sydney. The artists in this paper were not so much combined by collaboration as supplanted or obliterated. Mieke Bal contends that 'the subject's agency ... consists not of inventing but of intervening, of a "supplementation" that does not replace the image but adds to it'. Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999, p 13. Bal repeats theorist Judith Butler's astute refusal to replace 'the intentional subject with a personified "construction", which, as she puts it, "belongs at the grammatical site of the subject"'. Bal, *ibid*, p 14.

3. Jennifer Phipps, interview with the author. Biennale director Nick Waterlow hosted the two artists in Sydney, introducing them to Western Desert Aboriginal artists at one dinner party; Phipps hosted the artists in Melbourne. For a contemporary review of their Sydney performance see Mike Parr, 'Parallel Fictions', p 183; see also Jennifer Phipps, 'Marina Abramovic/Ulay/Ulay/Marina Abramovic', *Art & Text*, no 3, Spring 1981, pp 43–50. They were already shifting the focus of their work from violent actions to passive immobility (even though both types of work involved obliviousness of the audience).

4. Abramovic's biographical entry for that year read: 'EXPERIMENTS WITHOUT EATING AND TALKING FOR LONG PERIODS OF TIME MEETING TIBETANS NIGHTSEA CROSSING PERFORMANCE BE QUIET STILL AND SOLITARY THE WORLD WILL ROLL IN ECSTASY AT YOUR FEET EATING HONEY ANTS, GRASS HOPPERS ANIMA MUNDI WOUNDED SNAKE MEN MISSING BOOMERANG SLOW MOTION.' Abramovic, *Biography*, p 41; Abramovic and Ulay separately observed: 'M. The desert reduces yourself to yourself, that's all that happens. U. You are alone.' Phipps, 'Abramovic/Ulay/...', op cit, p 47.



Marina Abramovic/Ulay, *Gold Found by the Artists*, 1981, action (duration 16 days), Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Photo courtesy of Marina Abramovic

multiple narratives, including that of Western Desert painting and post-studio art, overlap.

They first visited Australia in 1979, presenting *The Brink* (1979) at the Sydney Biennale and *Go ... Stop ... Back ... Stop* (1979), at the National Gallery of Victoria.³ In 1980, Abramovic and Ulay visited Australia for the second time. Between October 1980 and March 1981, they travelled across the desert centre.

Much of their second journey was spent struggling with sheer physical discomfort while driving and camping alone for extended periods at remote desert waterholes. They were hoping their uncomfortable desert retreat would develop heightened sensitivity and the ability to communicate through means other than speech or physical sight – in other words to attempt (though it sounds wacky) telepathy and clairvoyance.⁴

Their slightly mad, Bruce Chatwin-like epic of crushing heat (they were visiting the Centre during its searing-hot summer and 40 degrees centigrade plus temperatures), loneliness, disappointment, and delayed epiphany took them to the Aboriginal settlement at Papunya, a hellish, dysfunctional community near Alice Springs forcibly created by the government's racist policies during the 1960s.

From 1971 onwards, a core group of Aboriginal painters had organised themselves into a cooperative called Papunya Tula Artists, rapidly creating paintings of enormous ambition on a scale that was both public and political. There was almost complete absence of any market for such works, even in 1981. Their works now, however, constitute the most significant corpus of art made in Australia during the twentieth century.

At Papunya, Abramovic and Ulay saw several major Aboriginal acrylic paintings and were mesmerised, as Abramovic remembers. They

5. Crocker was art adviser at Papunya between 1979 and 1981.
6. Marina Abramovic, conversation with the author, 2 October 2003; Bernice Murphy, conversation with the author, 30 September 2003; all further references by either Abramovic or Murphy are drawn from these telephone interviews unless otherwise stated.
7. Eric Michaels, 'Bad Aboriginal Art', in *Bad Aboriginal Art: Tradition, Media and Technological Horizons*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1994. But even that is not the whole story: though Desert painting did not exist before 1971, the artists were quite familiar with decades of art and craft traditions, including landscape watercolour painting that had evolved during the 1950s.
8. Curator Bernice Murphy, who had both welcomed Western Desert Painting into that major 1981 survey of mainstream contemporary art, 'Perspecta', and commissioned *Gold Found by the Artists* to be performed shortly after its close, notes that *Napperby Death Spirit Dreaming* was both affirmatively 'traditional' and audaciously innovative: 'It was anchored in traditional Aboriginal cultural life in its use of an inherited repertoire of signs and mapping devices derived from body painting, decorated objects and large ground sculptures created in ceremonial life. It is also traditional in the knowledge and belief systems it projects. However this work was directed to an audience outside its own community.'
9. Abramovic and Ulay, in Phipps, 'Abramovic/Ulay...', op cit, p 46.
10. Abramovic, in Phipps, ibid, p 47.

established a good rapport with the resident Papunya art adviser, a young Englishman, Andrew Crocker.⁵ They were profoundly affected by the charisma and authority of the old painters, as they began a long and intense friendship with the famous Papunya Tula painter, Charlie Tararu Tjungurrayi.⁶

It was the period when the major painters produced a series of monumental, cartographic works – for example Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's (assisted by his brother Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri) *Warlugulong* (1976), or *Napperby Death Spirit Dreaming* (1980) by Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri (assisted by Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri). Abramovic and Ulay took photographs of the painters at work on *Napperby Death Spirit Dreaming* and were later amazed to see both the works on exhibition together in Sydney at the 1981 'Perspecta' survey, Australia's version of the Whitney Biennale, which had been curated by their friend Bernice Murphy.

The Western Desert painting movement that Abramovic/Ulay encountered already had an *art* history as well as an *ethnographic* history of highly skilled concealment. The paintings are usually explained iconographically in two ways – as maps, and as hermetic texts. It is not quite so simple. Desert painting, as anthropologists Eric Michaels and Fred Myers have both famously noted, must be confronted directly as the product of explicitly contemporary manufacture as art, without assuming that this implies a naïve formalist approach. Further, these were works produced with close regard to what the artists thought Western audiences would admire.⁷ They had made, in collaboration with their first art adviser, school teacher Geoffrey Bardon, a series of conscious decisions about the transformation of mnemonically represented, collaboratively owned tradition – an inherited repertoire of signs and mapping devices derived from body painting, decorated objects and large ground sculptures created in ceremonial life – into individually or often collaboratively produced paintings.⁸

Abramovic and Ulay had initially expected to meet Aboriginal people who would not only be close to their traditional culture, but who would also welcome them into its mystical reality. What they instead found was both personal and artistic reserve. In a brief interview, published shortly after they had returned from the desert, Abramovic and Ulay recorded their frustration with the inaccessible Aboriginal Other: 'I must say for myself I expected very much from the contact with Aborigines, and I got very disappointed.... I found there was something like a wall between them and me' (Abramovic).⁹ Nevertheless, they were eager to draw parallels between the nomadic heritage of desert Aborigines and their artistic practice. Abramovic drew a link between the impermanence of their performance actions and Aboriginal ceremonies, attaching particular significance to the quality of inaccessibility, which had also been valued by others, including Gilbert & George. Abramovic and Ulay emphasised that withdrawal from public view was a way of gathering psychic power. In the desert, away from all other people except each other, they thought that 'because of the incredible bonds of nature, you just function as a receiver, and as a sender of certain energies and actually it's the most important experience, we felt'.¹⁰ One result was the proliferation of infill dots and repetitive marks that dominated many paintings and separated precise motifs. Anthropologist Eric Michaels suggested that 'current Aboriginal paintings be confronted directly as products of explicitly

contemporary manufacture'.¹¹ This was exactly how they were intended: acrylic painting did not exist before 1971. Traditional relationships, between Dreaming-owner and Dreaming-guardian, were indispensable to the correct censorship and transmission of secret motifs and these were now complicated by the production and proliferation of art.¹² Contrary to the European artists' desires, Aboriginal artists enacted the same refusal to represent themselves straightforwardly as contemporary artists such as Abramovic and Ulay.

Abramovic insists that she and Ulay were profoundly influenced by the desert and by Aboriginal culture; the two are merged in her mind. Less and less, certainly, their art consisted of dramatic ordeals; now, as well, the Australian experience confirmed them in setting their joint face against the mudslide of allegorical, neo-expressionist painting, to which many other artists succumbed. Abramovic's fantastic expectations of what she and Ulay would find in their meetings with Aboriginal tribal elders in the desert were met at Papunya.

What did they learn? In Sydney, on their return from the desert, the artists performed *Gold Found by the Artists* (1981), in which they sat facing each other, completely immobile and silent, for sixteen days of stormy and physically harrowing, seven-hour performances that were disrupted by audience interruptions, noise, and bizarre attempts to communicate with the artists.

This work then became the first instalment of an all-inclusive ninety-day work spanning several times and places, *Nightsea Crossing* (1981–86), rather than a work in itself.



Marina Abramovic/Ulay, *Go ... stop ... Back ... stop*, 1979, action (duration 1.5 hours), National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Photo courtesy of Marina Abramovic

11. See Eric Michaels, 'Postmodernism, Appropriation and Western Desert Acrylics', in *Postmodernism: A Consideration of the Appropriation of Aboriginal Imagery*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 1989, p 32.

12. For an elaboration on ritual significance and acrylic production methods in Aboriginal art, see Peter Sutton, ed, *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, Viking, New York, 1989.

This conception of an overarching, imminent work (or, perhaps, psychic state) manifesting itself was crucial. It was owed, the artists said to Bernice Murphy at the time, to their Desert experiences. Abramovic and Ulay deferred the experience's closure by refusing to define the action as a discrete work, but instead classifying it as a sort of shadow world.

Two years later, in 1983, in a performance of *Nightsea Crossing* (subtitled *Conjunction*), at Amsterdam's Sonesta Koepelzaal, the artists sat for seven hours over four days with Charlie Tararu Tjungurrayi and a Tibetan lama. The work had been commissioned by the Museum Foder (a branch of the Stedelijk Museum).

Ulay flew to Australia to collect and accompany Tjungurrayi to Amsterdam, and afterwards he took the elderly artist back to Papunya. Given the highly gender-separated nature of traditional Aboriginal society, Abramovic took responsibility for the Tibetan, Ulay for the Aborigine. Incidentally, Tjungurrayi's recollection of the collaboration is mentioned in Bruce Chatwin's ficto-ethnographic novel *Songlines*, as if it was a figment of the Aborigine's imagination.

There are several reasons why we should take Tjungurrayi's participation in the performance-collaboration with Abramovic and Ulay seriously. What brought him to participate in something that appears to be so like World Music?

First, we should not discount the elderly painter's own creative agency in all this. Tjungurrayi freely and knowingly flew across the world to participate. He had consistently been a spokesman for younger Pintupi



Marina Abramovic/Ulay, *Conjunction*, 1983, from *Nightsea Crossing*, 1981–86, action (duration four days, with Charlie Tararu Tjungurrayi and Lama Ngawang Soepa Lueyar), Sonesta Koepelzaal, Amsterdam.

13. Geoffrey Bardon found him 'the most accessible of the Pintupi painting men'. Ken Watson, 'Charlie Tararu Tjungurrayi', in *Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius*, eds Hetti Perkins and Hannah Fink, a superb landmark exhibition catalogue, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2000, p 293.
14. This was Richard Kimber's question. My own experience, during extensive research on the pair, suggests that their relationships with each other and with their collaborators were not based on exploitation, whereas other performance art, Vito Acconci's, for example, overtly and deliberately was.
15. The ethical refusal to recognisably write-the-individual-self enacted in Aboriginal painting – in other words, the artists' rejection of unconstrained self-expression and insistence on the visual unknowability of their symbolic referent, and the unknowability of an immensely rich secret/sacred cultural origin, other than a cartographically symbolised landscape location – helps us understand, by comparison, the sheer difference of Abramovic and Ulay's project from other performance art of the same period, which insisted on a revelation that identity is structured masochism. For an elaboration of that art see Kathy O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1998, p 18 and p 84.

artists.¹³ He had been responsible for translating many other artists' traditional painting stories during the 1970s. He was a close friend of the cosmopolitan Papunya Tula art adviser Andrew Crocker (who had begun marketing Western Desert paintings as contemporary art rather than as mythological narratives in paint a couple of years before), and who took Tjungurrayi to England in 1981 to visit the Queen and then to Crocker's verdant ancestral home. He was, coincidentally, the first Western Desert artist to receive a retrospective exhibition in 1987. Tjungurrayi had consistently worked with Europeans as a stockman from 1932 on and had extensive experience mediating across cultures. He was renowned for his intellectual curiosity and sheer intelligence, as well as for his mischievous, even clownish sense of humour. I think we can guess the answer to the question as to whether Tararu Tjungurrayi was exploited or whether he cooperated with Abramovic and Ulay.¹⁴

Second, the success or failure of such a cross-cultural collaboration, as Abramovic insists it was, should not be judged as if the work was a forum for cross-cultural reconciliation. Now, it would necessarily be just that, if held in Australia, given the horrific history of cultural genocide. But in Amsterdam, as Abramovic attests, especially given the presence of a Tibetan lama, this was neither the intention nor the result. Instead, something else was at stake that was more impersonal, involving work, not a spectacular space based on the symbolic enactment of moral positions and acknowledgements. Abramovic and Ulay's project was clearly different from other performance art of the same period that insisted on a revelation that identity is structured by masochism.¹⁵ Or a view onto difference? No. Their art, like the Aboriginal paintings they had been so influenced by, postulated a lack in the spectator at the same time as it invited empathic projection into an alternative space by telepathic senses. We are familiar from Deleuze with the distinction between memory for the individual subject and something quite different – memory for many subjects, or what Deleuze termed 'world memory'. Here, I want us to consider that collaborative consciousness might not involve sharing – not even the sharing of difference – but something more radical, the obliteration of difference.

Now I am not doing anything so obvious as conflating absence with the restoration of the past, of a spurious humanism, however well intentioned, that seeks to oppose 'spirituality' against 'critical deconstruction'. Abramovic/Ulay's actions are *not* Buddhist, just as Barnett Newman's 1960s zip paintings are not Kabbalism. Art is more complex than that.

Abramovic and Ulay happened to have become involved directly in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy just after their Sydney performance. This offered them a sophisticated, non-Western, quasi-precedent for deconstructive presence. Now, Desert painting is compared to conceptualism by Vivien Johnson, who is probably the most important writer in this respect, on account of her close involvement with the artists and her detailed, sensitive readings of their works. It is a profoundly *mental* art, but this is misleading. At the moment that Western Desert artists were starting to paint, conceptual artists such as American Joseph Kosuth (*The Grammarian*, 1971), Mel Ramsden and expatriate Ian Burn were dictating the supremacy and transparency of their intentions to the reader. This desire to police the audience now seems quite distant and odd, but those artists were determined to avoid 'misinterpretation'. American artist

Douglas Huebler, for example, said: 'What I say is part of the art work. I don't look to critics to say things about my work. I tell them what it's about.'¹⁶ There was no space in their minds for anything else. The same is true of Desert painters' relationship to the production of their works, to the source from which they come. Neither artistic collaboration nor unconventional forms of art is necessarily marked by the desire to empower the audience's unconstrained experience of art. In this case, Abramovic and Ulay were certainly not enacting an allegory about white/black reconciliation, nor did any of the participants think they were.

Abramovic and Ulay propose a different understanding of the structure of self and identity from other post-studio artists (which is why body theorists such as Amelia Jones and Kathy O'Dell have such trouble with their work), and I know they saw their own performativity and sense of duration deriving from the impact of the Desert painters.

Both *Conjunction* and *Napperby Death Spirit Dreaming* imply, at first sight, uncommunicative collaborative artists involved in inaccessible work processes that are sealed off from their (Western) audience, though appreciation and acculturation, of course, are not. So, the question is: does the inscrutability of the works hypothesise a lack in the audience? How can we understand one work except as tourism and the other except through tourism? It is a question we cannot avoid (ethnographic and identity-based frameworks do not help), but I think that the answer is complex. They do not *just* hypothesise a lack but, yes, the pictures and the performances embody a withholding or turning away. The inscrutability of either work simply does not give way through symbolic decoding onto readable allegory or illustration, or even of propositions about the nature of psychic identity. But this is not just a matter of cultural and interpersonal incommensurability, and the artists do not seem to be insisting on anything as didactic as their audiences' spiritual lack so much as that lack as a precondition for a more complex understanding of art itself. Equally, Western Desert painting saves itself from anachronistic modernism by the complication of authorial constraints and rules, of collaboration and collective self-adjustment. Abstract painting, however, was only just, in 1971 (but not in 1981, or again in 2001), an up-to-the-minute artistic syntax in itself, and was definitely not worth celebrating for its contemporaneity. The Papunya production queers the modernism we know in the articulation of decorative abstract inaccessibility and a double negative – a missing secret. If we approach Western Desert painting without taking the complexities of authorship into account, it is much harder to explain the works. In fact, visualisation with the mind's eye becomes a definite aspect of Abramovic and Ulay's works from this point on. For a start, the type of experience they suggest in *Nightsea Crossing* is not necessarily non-visual, even if the artists ignored the audience, and the artists were profoundly and almost completely absorbed in their unconventional double and multiple self.

Ownership and lending, not production, is the key to understanding the innovations of both *Conjunction* and *Napperby Death Spirit Dreaming*. Even though the latter work is principally by Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, without Clifford Possum the work could not have existed; this type of collaboration goes beyond that of assistant and director. Apart from his status as an elder, as Abramovic notes, Tjungurrayi was

16. Douglas Huebler, in Charles Harrison, 'On Exhibitions and the World at Large: Seth Siegelau in Conversation with Charles Harrison', *Studio International*, 178:917, December 1969, pp 202–3.

also a shaman; collaboration with Tjungurrayi was Abramovic and Ulay's point of access to his spiritual authority.

In Desert painting, just what is loaned, and how? Australian aesthetician Elizabeth Burns Coleman argues that Aboriginal ceremonial designs, from which Desert paintings derive, have the same ontological structure as insignia, as coats of arms.¹⁷ The individual artwork in this sense is an indexical, performative trace of the insignia, which is to say the template. Abramovic and Ulay 'owned' their actions, in the same way: they also owned the right to repeat it; they owned the ability to complete or close the overarching über-work, and even to revisit it years later in parodic or pastiche form, as Abramovic did when she recreated the history of performance art in *Biography* (1994).¹⁸ Style (or the signature of personal contingency) is owned more or less individually by Western Desert painters too, but the experience that the painter performs in materialising the insignia, of course, could not be: it is owned by the community and held in trust by the custodian, the painter who is licensed to reproduce or loan the insignia. It would pass to another on his or her death, rather than become part of the deceased artist's estate. This is why control over copyright is so important to Indigenous artists. As Burns Coleman says, 'Understood as insignia, the claim that the appropriation of art is an appropriation of identity makes perfect sense: it is literally true'.¹⁹ Even so, as Vivien Johnson helpfully points out in her important book, *Biographical Dictionary*, 'tribalism as a social structure does not logically entail collectivism as a personality structure', nor, as she notes, does it constrain large egos.²⁰ Abramovic and Ulay's contribution to the ongoing narrative of international art is as hard to evaluate as their sincerity precisely because – and this is the same point I make about works by Western Desert painters – the criteria for adjudicating the ownership of work involving collaboration and mystical values is additionally complex if stylistic innovation is both involved and downplayed.

Communal ownership should be approached through the legal framework of the concept of 'trust'. Renowned anthropologist Fred Myers writes that the Desert people he knew described ownership of sacred sites as collective, by a 'kinship network', but at the same time some claims to ownership were more important than others.²¹ The simulation of a relatively conventional individual artistic identity in Western Desert painting – abstractionist – through the impact and influence of white Australian art advisers – turns the heritage of modernist art around, because the art most vulnerable to colonisation by unconventional biography turned out to be, ironically, formalist art – which locates meaning within the work, not within biography, and is oblivious to ownership. When we look for collaborations across cultural boundaries, we find them again, flowing in the reverse direction to Abramovic and Ulay's work with Tjungurrayi.

Geoffrey Bardon, who empowered and choreographed the first Western Desert acrylic paintings in 1971, was a young white artist-turned-school-teacher who really wanted to make experimental animated films in the Desert. As Paul Carter argues in an immensely clever essay for the 2000 exhibition, 'Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius', the syntax of Western Desert paintings can be related to the manic grammar of experimental film's Brakhage-like hieroglyphs and

17. Elizabeth Burns Coleman, 'Aboriginal Painting: Identity and Authenticity', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 59:4, Fall 2001, pp 385–402.

18. Marina Abramovic, *Biography* (with Charles Atlas), Reihe Cantz, Ostfildern, 1994, p 25; *Biography* was a performance and a self-portrait; its text was Abramovic's résumé, incorporating and recapitulating her collaboration with Ulay.

19. Coleman, op cit, p 397.

20. Vivien Johnson, *Aboriginal Artists of the Western Desert: A Biographical Dictionary*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1994.

21. Fred Myers, 'The politics of representation: Australian Aborigines and anthropological discourse', in *American Ethnologist*, 13, 1986, pp 136–53, p 150.

notations. It therefore seems that there is a paradox in the migration of individualistic formalist painting to the vast Western Desert and more complex authorial and collaborative frameworks, following the failure of Greenberg's hegemonic version of great art in the post-Noland 1960s, and this paradox cannot be unpicked if we insist on the binary of post-colonial identity versus modernist art, or indigenous versus Western art. For against the drift of postcolonial art, the painters' declarations of micro-nationhood were parsed within, rather than against, the syntax of reductive abstract painting. The artists effectively situated themselves as real heirs in the teleology of Western abstraction as well as heirs to their own culture. The role of the art adviser was itself a form of collaboration rather than assistant. Particular advisers, in particular Bardon, made interventions (colour, motif selection, editing, scale) with the painters that we would normally regard as artistically fundamental if we mistake production (syntactical decisions) for ownership (the right to authorise image production of insignia). This, in turn, requires that we reflect on just what is projected visually in collaborations such as we have been thinking about, and denies the common-sense maxim that art is visual (a rule that had been denied by Duchamp, of course, many decades before). We usually look at the artists' conception of their culture, but should think about their conception of painting as well, noting the resonances with anti-visual trajectories in European art at the time. Vivien Johnson says that at least one senior man, Maurice Luther Jurrurula, had difficulty accepting the painting movement because he did not see that his culture could be legitimately captured in written, as opposed to oral, forms. His worry was perhaps about the difference between mnemonic (traditionally sung) and archive-based (recorded in documentary, painted form) remembrance; it was about the likely failure of visibility to constitute a mnemonic, affective, memory trigger. This is important. Decision-making was collaborative and there was discussion not only about whether the pictures were sacred but also about painting itself. The inscrutability of both categories of works was not ever a matter of asserting incommensurability, and the artists do not ever seem to insist on anything as didactic as their audiences' spiritual lack as they seem simply to add the educational function to the works' mental matrix. Remember again, these paintings were always made to be shown in exhibitions in the West. They were not meant for circulation within the artists' community at all.

Let us now return to the Amsterdam instalment of *Nightsea Crossing*, and examine the whole thing through the lens of ethical cross-cultural appropriation and collaboration. We immediately note that the audience was peripheral to the experience, and that neither the audience nor ourselves could tell whether a genuinely real experience was enacted, performed, or simulated. We also immediately face the realisation that art theory's conventional psychoanalytic frameworks for such extra-personal and psychic collaborative experiences, though neither inappropriate nor incorrect, are just inadequate and limited.

Remember also that there is no logical means of either proving or disproving the work's implicit claim that a heightened experience involving either psychic communion or psychic self-absorption – one or the other – through group meditation was under way, or of you disproving my correct intuition of their experience. Abramovic remembers that

the presence of the Aborigine and the Tibetan made the experience much more concentrated and their attention more focused. My discussion of Tjungurrayi's status in his community, his omnivorous intellectual curiosity and his fearlessness (attested separately by Murphy, Crocker, Bardon, and Abramovic) tends to discount any idea that Tjungurrayi and/or the Tibetan were the artists' passive tools.

Aboriginal and Tibetan Otherness, we might assume at first, is here appropriated under a wishy-washy rubric of sentimental convergence, though the bird's-eye view photographs that illustrate the work, taken from one of the three upper balconies that soared above the performers, emphasise the gap between everyone. The audience looked in from the three galleries that spread out from the central, circular dome under which the performers sat at the huge, gold-covered table that separated all four participants: Abramovic and Ulay faced each other, and Charlie Tararu Tjungurrayi sat opposite Lama Ngawang Soepa Lueyar. They were simply asked to sit still for the four seven-hour sessions: Tjungurrayi immediately shifted into a completely still suspension, from which he did not emerge until the time was up. Lama Lueyar shifted and shuffled but was completely relaxed, sitting in meditation; Abramovic and Ulay, on the other hand, found the sessions physically exhausting.

Aboriginal or Tibetan culture's access to spiritual collectivity – the pre-linguistic ground signified by the words Dreaming or Sunyata – is to an extent appropriated in some of the details and gestures that we can spot in the photographs and in the work's caption. Tjungurrayi was dressed in ochre-coloured pyjama-like work-clothes, the lama remained in his crimson-maroon robes, Abramovic was dressed in red work-clothes and Ulay in orange. The gold-leaf-covered table at the centre of the action looks, of course, as if it alludes to alchemy, and gold-leaf covers Buddhist stupas throughout the world.

Abramovic and Ulay, it might be argued, were indulging in a problematic exploitation – an orientalisation – of Aboriginality and Tibetan culture through stereotyping. The chromatic coding could be understood to fix their collaborators in aspic, according to which 'Aboriginal' art or 'Tibet' would indicate the condition of a 'spiritual' thing, thus undermining from within the primary sense of the collective inaccessibility from which these works emerge.

One view of Abramovic and Ulay's work is that the particular variant of collaboration that it elaborates deliberately excludes any wider social or political stake. For some writers, including Amelia Jones, their procedure of wholesale bodily appropriation and its underlying theoretical justification, most notably laid out in the famous pre-Australian ordeals, results in what is little more than gendered domination. For Abramovic and Ulay, however, the obliteration of personal, ethnic identity was, first, a way of enacting an ethical connection or bond between souls (the 'group soul' of my title) and, second, invoking the possible promise of a human community based on virtues such as a compassionate, panoramic vision (the discriminating ethical vision of Buddhism, which by then was exerting a powerful pull on Abramovic).

Clearly, something is at stake in the way that Abramovic and Ulay responded to Papunya and Tjungurrayi, in both *Gold Found by the Artists* and *Conjunction*. I think that we can see how important this was through the over-inscribed signals – through the New Age mise-en-scène

and trademark silences. These works – both *Nightsea Crossing* and *Napperby Death Spirit Dreaming* – implicitly involve debates, even disputes, inside very different groups of artists with regard to image-making and collective psychic experience, with regard to mnemonic versus archival experience, with regard to positive and negative visuality. Here, visuality is conceived not in terms of its domination of the other but as a responsibility, in the words of the famous Desert anthropologist Fred Myers.

How does this work? In all of the three worlds – in the shadow world of rest energy produced by the third hand of an artistic collaboration that consciously gathered psychic power by personal withdrawal, in the shadow world of secret/sacred tribal law and initiated responsibility gained through seeing, in the shadow world of Buddhist phenomenal existence – there is no absolute distance between ‘us’ and the ‘other’. In other words, difference exists *but* visuality is both domination *and* initiation. And a theory of positive visuality lies in Norman Bryson’s ‘mode of constitutive negativity or emptiness, *sunyata*’, by which Bryson is implying that Lacan’s Real is a less thorough reconstruction of our understanding of visuality’s potential than Tibetan Buddhism’s *sunyata*.²² This is not amateurish ‘living in the moment’ or sentimentality, but a way of enacting an ethical connection or bond between souls and, second, invoking the possible promise of a human community based on a compassionate, panoramic vision, a discriminating ethical vision.

In short, we could say that the appropriative collaborative identity that Abramovic and Ulay set out – and that they had already located in the shadow world of Western Desert painting’s networks of ownership and responsibility – is akin to the moral law that locality fails. What my colleague, Australian art theorist Rex Butler, says about contemporary cross-cultural Aboriginal/White artistic collaborations is that ‘this absolute connection with the other is something we always aspire to and which we always fall short of. Analogously, thinking in more overtly Kantian terms, the desire for a seamless communication between the moral law within and without, would always be predicated on and destined to non-fulfilment.’²³ We would have to say that Abramovic and Ulay set out to prove this wrong; locality would fail.

From this perspective, though, one would still find fault with Abramovic and Ulay not so much for their appropriation of Aboriginality as for the degree to which they still maintained a distance from it, through symbolic props, tables, and colour-codings, through the partial failure to allow locality to be obliterated by the perceived need to signal otherness, but definitely not for their appropriation of Aboriginality, for *Conjunction* is a massive, apparently preposterous but absolutely necessary identification with others.

Gestures concerning cultural convergence are currently, given the hopelessly regressive political situation in Australia, regarded with enormous suspicion as yet another form of imperialistic colonisation of minorities by the dominant settler/immigrant culture. But the artistic, as opposed to didactic, problem with cross-cultural collaborations seems to occur precisely in the preservation of cultural difference. Let us look at an example. White artist Imants Tillers and Papunya painter Michael Nelson Tjakamarra have been involved for the last three years in a

22. Norman Bryson, ‘The Gaze in the Expanded Field’ (1988), in *Vision and Visuality: Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, no 2, ed Hal Foster, New Press, New York, 1999, pp 87–114, p 99.

23. See Rex Butler and Morgan Thomas, ‘“I am Not Sorry”: Richard Bell Out of Context’, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, 4:1, 2003, p 37.

medium-term collaboration across the fraught, historically tragic boundaries between settler and Aboriginal cultures. In a recent collaborative work by Tillers and Tjakamarra, *From Afar* (2001), the distinctive signature of each artist is preserved and presumed artistically necessary for the enactment of an ethical project that emerges, strangely enough, as self-defeating because it is over-fastidious in its preservation of cultural difference.²⁴

The context for cross-cultural collaborations has altered profoundly since 1983. There has been a clear and violent reaction – both critical and legislative, even down to laws against the depiction of Uluru (Ayers Rock) in works of art and book illustrations – against the practice of postmodern quotation across cultures, on moral and copyright grounds.

To a generation of *Third Text*-inflected postcolonial critics (this is my own background as well), this seemed appropriate, and we coincidentally became quite paranoid in our attitudes towards art at the same time as we converted postcolonial insights into curatorial, managerial jargon. There is now an over-literal suspicion of artistic gestures that postulate conjunction instead of difference.

As I noted before, if Abramovic and Ulay were to have staged *Conjunction* in Australia, in 2003, it would have been attacked by black and white critics alike as insufficiently political and as oblivious to the story of continuing racist oppression. *Conjunction* was one of Jean-Hubert Martin's inspirations for his *Magiciens de la terre* in 1989, and all the charges that were laid against Martin would be wheeled out again. However, this would be mistaken.

First, the matter of ethics: Abramovic and Ulay were deeply aware that the work might be seen as exploitative, though they had established a long, committed, and ethical relationship with their collaborators. They had worked to assist both Tibetan and Aboriginal communities by giving their time, work, and funds outside of artistic activity. We know that they were not tourists. On their first visit to Australia in 1979 they had bounced into Alice Springs, to be turned around and refused permission to visit traditional Aboriginal lands by activist lawyer Philip Toyne, who was representing the Central Lands Council at that time. He told them to come back and put something practical into the communities. They did: when they returned in 1981 they worked in the Lands Council office for a period as unpaid assistants before travelling into the desert with full permissions. Ulay returned several times to Australia to visit Tjungurrayi in the last period of his life.

Second and more fundamentally, this work of art was not a space for reconciliation, for balancing profit and loss, but a space for conjunction. The two are not the same at all. Abramovic and Ulay's unqualified appropriation of the Aboriginal and Tibetan other goes with Abramovic's repeated acknowledgements that the Desert and connections with Aboriginal painters were the foundational experiences henceforth shaping their art. The encounter was not predicated on the model of reconciliation. Abramovic and Ulay run up against a sceptical bias in contemporary Western cultural theory. *Conjunction* (1983) occurs in the context of a further meaning of reconciliation, in which the binaries of East/West and primitive/modern meet within the zone of historic colonisation and exploitation: the East by the West; the so-called primitive by the modern. But by choosing to collaborate with

24. Butler says, 'It seems to "go wrong".... In this sense it is Tillers himself who would be the first to accuse himself of failing to appropriate the other properly or fully.' Ibid, p 38.

representatives of two highly sophisticated, non-Western belief systems, Abramovic and Ulay were engaging with two 'traditional' and 'spiritual' systems whose exponents were expert in the precise task the artists hoped to undertake. Western Desert painting offered a model of collaboration based on the loan of self, signified by the loan of insignia and cultural authority. Such an encounter is not symbolic. Abramovic and Ulay's collaborative practice had been powerfully affected by the model of Desert painting, in which collaborating voices licence others. Not from a position as assistants, not as equal co-producers, but as owners and lenders of images and authority. There is more to life than culture and politics.

Artistic collaboration – including that across gender and racial lines – is not the same as and does not require the demonstration of collaboration, or the certification of itself as collaboration, or the preservation of difference if (and this qualification is crucial) the participants are authorised. If they are authorised to lend it. Without that cultural or social authorisation, though, we are left with reconciliation – and with the preservation of the peculiar, cultish figure of art. This is the problem – the problem of a non-aesthetic set of criteria – that many contemporary artist groups in search of social authenticity through interactivity are grappling with.